

ELYAKUM OSTHASHINSKI, legendary CEO of Carmel Mizrahi, with David Ben-Gurion at Rishon Le Zion Cellars, where Israel's first prime minister once worked. (Photos: Carmel)

JAMES ROTHSCHILD donated the wineries of Rishon Lezion and Zichron Ya'acov to Carmel SCV (Societe Cooperative Vignerones) des Grandes Caves.



35 YEARS OF FAMINE, 40 YEARS OF PLENTY



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Israeli wine may be split into two periods: before the founding of the Golan Heights Winery, and after. In my previous article, I selected the wines that told the Israel wine story over 75 years. This time, I want to name the people who made a difference and epitomized their era.

The first 35 years were the years of Carmel, the historic winery of Israel. The person who best represents this period is Elyakum Osthashinski, who was CEO of SCV des Grandes Caves and Carmel Mizrahi for nearly 30 years from the early 1950s. Previously, he had been mayor of Rishon Lezion. This was a period in which Carmel Mizrahi was a monopoly. These were not great days of Carmel in terms of quality, but were in terms of dominance. Israeli wine did not have a great image, but times were different.

Nevertheless, Carmel kept Israeli wine afloat through all the ups and downs of building the state. Osthashinski provided the stability, and his high profile and longevity merited respect. Carmel's greatest ever award would come far later, when the Carmel Kayoumi Shiraz won the International Trophy at the Decanter World Wine Awards in 2010.

James Rothschild was the son of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who provided the finance and French expertise to found a wine industry. James left France and went to live in England. In 1957, he generously arranged to donate the Rishon Le Zion and Zichron Ya'acov Wine Cellars to Carmel SCV. This was a move that secured the future of Israeli wine and gave it independence. Thus, the involvement and interest of the Rothschild family in the Israeli wine industry extended from 1882 until 1957. This was the same Rothschild who donated the money to build Israel's parliament building – the Knesset. David Ben-Gurion,

arguably the most famous person ever to work at Rishon Le Zion Cellars, wrote: "Truly a great father was followed by a son no less great."

Avraham Meir Shor was one half of the AM Shor Bros, the winery founded in 1848 in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. In 1955, he and his brother split, and he continued to make wine at the winery, which was renamed Zion Winery. It remains the oldest existing winery until today. For 175 years, the owner, manager and even the winemaker of the Shor – Zion Winery has always been a member of the Shor family.

The other brother, Moshe Shalom Shor, went into the spirits business, but his children returned to wine in the Arza, Hacormim and Shimshon wineries. Today there are no fewer than six wineries or brands owned by different branches of the Shor family: 1848; Arza; Hacormim; Hayotzer; Shorr [sic] Estate; and Zion.

After the founding of the state, Menachem Teperberg founded a winery called Efrat in western Jerusalem. This winery had roots in the Old City, where his descendants had founded a winery in 1870. Unfortunately, that winery went bankrupt. The winery Menachem founded was small and devoted to liquid religion; however, his son Moti was to transform it. He changed its name to Teperberg Winery, moved to new premises, and it is now Israel's largest family winery and the third-largest winery in Israel. Furthermore, Moti Teperberg has been at the helm as CEO for nearly 40 years!

In 1976, the first vineyards were planted on the Golan Heights, and the Golan Heights Winery was founded in 1983.

They wanted expertise from abroad and were put in touch with Peter Stern from California. He was to be the winemaking consultant for the next 20 years. Stern, along with a series of his protégé Califor-

nian-trained winemakers, re-invented Israeli viticulture and brought New World winemaking techniques to Israel, using the cooler climate, high elevation vineyards of the Golan.

Stern brought about a massive change in Israeli winemaking. The beginning of the quality revolution was due to him. It was Stern who set the standards that was to produce Israel's first world-class wines. Starting in 1987, the Yarden Cabernet Sauvignons 1984 and 1985 began to win major international awards in London and Bordeaux, and Yarden has never stopped since.

Uri Shaked was the founder and CEO of Magash Shaked, leaders in distribution, importing and retailing. Shaked were the distributors who contributed greatly to the success of the Golan Heights Winery. They initiated a revolution in wine retailing with the founding of the Derech Ha'Yayin chain of wine stores. With street smarts and a great instinct, Uri Shaked has initiated and innovated, and his company has a finger in every pie.

Eli Ben-Zaken was a self-taught winemaker who learned winemaking from a book by Émile Peynaud. He was founder-owner-winemaker of Domaine du Castel. By a stroke of good fortune, his first wine, the Castel Grand Vin 1992, got noticed by Serena Sutcliffe MW, head of the Sotheby's Wine Department. She wrote that it was the best Israeli wine she had ever tasted. Ben-Zaken taught us about style, aesthetics, perfectionism and quality. Twice he built the most beautiful winery in Israel – first at Ramat Raziell and then Yad Hashmona.

Castel was the pioneer of the Judean Hills wine region and led a new movement to blends instead of varietals. Castel showed that smaller Israeli wineries could also make world-class wines. Castel gained third-party recognition at the very highest level. In the 2000s, Castel was the first Israeli winery to receive



ERAN PICK MW of Tzora Vineyards, Israel's first Master of Wine, prophet of precision viticulture and specialist in making wine with a sense of place. (Tzora Vineyards)

THE WRITER with Peter Stern (L), the Golan Heights Winery's Californian wine consultant who played a major role at the beginning of the quality wine revolution. (Adam Montefiore)

four stars in *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*. In the 2010s, *Robert Parker's Wine Advocate* scored the Castel Grand Vin and "C" Blanc du Castel as Israel's finest red and white wines, respectively; and in the 2020s, James Suckling.com has awarded Castel the highest scores for an Israeli winery.

Since 1992, Victor Schoenfeld has been the legendary winemaker of the Golan Heights Winery. He introduced cutting-edge viticulture to Israel. Suffering from the leaf roll virus, the Israeli wine industry was slow to come up with solutions. The Golan Heights Winery therefore decided to invest in their own propagation block and nursery, which they did in cooperation with French company Entav.

Following this, they undertook what they called Project 2020 to replace vineyards that had the virus with clean plant material. The winery then decided to become sustainable according to the protocol of "Lodi Rules" from California. All these initiatives were led and implemented by Schoenfeld, who at the same time through his research, made the Golan Heights the most observed and studied agricultural land in Israel. The technology they use and database of information they have would impress many of the most advanced wineries the world over. The Golan Heights Winery shows incredible consistency across the board, and everything is impressively done with a long-time interest in mind.

During the Schoenfeld era, the Golan Heights Winery won two awards that may be the best ever received by Israeli wineries: Best Producer Worldwide at Vinality and The Star Award for Best New World Winery presented by the *Wine Enthusiast*.

The late Daniel Rogov was the person who gave a voice to Israeli wine. He was the wine and food writer initially for *The Jerusalem Post* and later for *Haaretz*. Until he passed away in 2011, he faithfully recorded and wrote about Israeli wine with color and a flourish. His work was categorized in his *Rogov's Guide To Israeli Wines*, published annually. Now the era of the really dominant wine critic has passed, and it is true to say he has not been replaced. A developing wine industry needs a media chronicler, and Rogov was that man.

In the early years, Israeli wine was virtually men only. Today, I am pleased to say that women play an

enormous role in the success of Israeli wine. The pioneers were Tali Sandovski and Carmi Lebenstein. Sandovski, the senior winemaker at the Golan Heights Winery, is their longest-serving winemaker, and she was the first Israeli winemaker to gain a winemaking degree abroad. Lebenstein was the first woman in a senior position at a large winery. She was marketing manager at Carmel Mizrahi.

Avi Ben Ami and Haim Gan through Studio Ben Ami and Ish Anavim (Grape Man) have both contributed greatly to Israeli wine in organizing competitions and exhibitions. Ben Ami, a well-known sommelier, founded a company that organizes the main trade exhibition, Sommelier, and the Best Value and Eshkol Hazahav (The Golden Cluster) competitions. Ish Anavim organizes exhibitions, runs wine courses and Israel's main international competition, TerraVino. Both Avi Ben Ami and Haim Gan have greatly enriched the Israeli wine scene with their activities.

Shibi Drori, researcher at Ariel University and winemaker of Gvaot Winery, began a project to collect, catalogue and research all the local grape varieties his team could find throughout the country. With professionalism and dedication, Drori and his team have done some outstanding work. They found over 120 varieties; of these, 20 varieties showed potential for wine. The research continues, and Drori set up an experimental pilot winery at Ariel University. Following Cremisan Monastery's lead, some wineries started to make wines from these varieties. Recanati's Marawi caused worldwide interest. Now, one should not confuse the immense interest in these Holy Land varieties with quality. Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay are not trembling yet, but the research is important, and who knows where it will lead?

As a result of Eran Pick becoming Israel's first Master

of Wine, the interest in Israeli wine was higher and reached farther than ever before. Like the famous Heineken advertisement, Pick enabled Israeli wine to be seen with new eyes and reach places and people not accessible before. Part of this was also through the activities of the Judean Hills Quartet founded to market the region overseas. Quite apart from his effect on Brand Israel, Pick is CEO and winemaker of Tzora Vineyards. His work at this winery for me represents the current identity revolution, the adoption of precision viticulture, again, making blends instead of varietals. It also perfectly illustrates the comparatively new, outstanding quality of Israeli white wines. Above all is the idea of making a wine with a sense of place. Tzora's wines have received Israel's highest scores ever achieved in the *Wine Spectator* and *Decanter* magazines.

Gal Zohar is a sommelier-wine consultant-wine educator, who is a Master of Wine candidate. He founded in Israel the W Wine & Spirit School representing WSET, the world's most famous wine school. This school has revolutionized wine education in Israel, educating a whole generation of Israelis, including wine professionals and wine lovers, to understand wine in an internationally accepted way. There are many great educators, none more so than Nir Shaham with his Soreq Winemaking School, whose modesty and quiet professionalism has had an effect on Israeli wine over decades that can't be measured. However, no doubt the W School has been the most influential new development in Israeli wine in the last decade.

I suppose Israeli wine is a story of 35 years of famine, followed by 40 years of plenty. These are some of the names that represent 75 years of Israeli wine. My candidates for "The Israel Prize" in honor of the achievements of Israeli wine are Victor Schoenfeld, Eli Ben-Zaken and Eran Pick MW. They are truly representative of the Israeli wine industry, and this prestigious recognition is sorely and long overdue. ■

The writer is a wine industry insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 35 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com

VICTOR SCHOENFELD (L) was for more than 30 years the winemaker of the pioneering Golan Heights Winery – leaders in cutting-edge viticulture and sustainability. (Golan Heights Winery)

ELI BEN-ZAKEN is founder, owner and winemaker of Domaine du Castel, pioneer of the Judean Hills and of making wines in a more European style. (Domaine du Castel)

